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The Photographic Archive as Strategy:

Robert Zhao and *The Nature Museum*

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Singaporean artist Robert Zhao has been collecting old photographs of Singapore for the past 15 years. Often sourced through eBay, his personal archive of images currently numbers in the thousands, from 19th-century original silver gelatin prints to 20th-century commercial postcards, with a strong focus on natural history. In February 2017, the public was given unique access to Zhao's archive, when he presented *The Bizarre Honour* as part of Art Week Singapore. Combining old photographs with found objects and texts, the artist presented a *wunderkammer* of natural history in the style of a private museum. A large and complex installation occupying a two-storey house in a residential neighbourhood, hundreds of photographs of palm trees, rubber plantations, snake charmers and tiger hunters were displayed with expedition notebooks, taxidermied animals, animal traps, plastic fruit and more (Figure 1). Notably, the use of such photographs created a heightened sense of history and geography, lending to the installation a gravitas and legitimacy through a specificity of time and location.

The Bizarre Honour marked a significant shift in Zhao's artistic practice, namely through his use of a photographic archive. While many of his previous works had referenced old photographs, *The Bizarre Honour* was the first time he chose not to show a single image of his own, but to display archival photos

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FIGURE 1: *The Bizarre Honour*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

of Singapore.¹ Multiple variations of the work were subsequently developed and presented with a new title *The Nature Museum*. Described as “a fascinating exploration of Singapore’s natural history through historical and fantastical narratives created by The Institute of Critical Zoologists”, *The Nature Museum* was first presented at 72-13 as both exhibition and performance for the Singapore International Festival of Arts in September 2017; then adapted and presented at the Rockbund Art Museum from October 2017 to February 2018; The Fast Forward Festival in Athens in May 2018; and most recently at the Asia Pacific Triennale (APT) in Brisbane from November 2018 to April 2019, as a collaborative presentation with fellow Singaporean artist Donna Ong.² This review uses *The Nature Museum* as an entry point to consider the use of photographic archives as an artistic strategy in contemporary art. In the process, it will look at the documentary status of the photographic archive, its relationship with power and its subsequent potential for writing historiography. Through a close reading of *The Nature Museum*, I reflect on the success of such a strategy by Zhao.

The Photographic Archive

Early photographic history in Singapore has been largely determined by her colonial history. Singapore was a part of the British Straits Settlements

and an important trading port that saw a rapidly growing population from the mid-19th century. Increasing interest in the Far East was accompanied by a growing demand for photographs. As a result, numerous enterprising European photographers travelled through the region, making a wealth of images for photographic consumption. Studios such as G.R. Lambert & Co. and Sachtler & Co., and photographers like John Thomson and C.J. Kleingrothe were responsible for creating an entire archive of ethnographic types and landscapes of Southeast Asia, providing European viewers with their first impressions of the region. These photographs ranged from panoramic landscapes and architecture photos to studio portraits—often of racial types—and still lifes.³ They were circulated in books, albums and as postcards, and by all accounts, enjoyed a roaring trade. Technological advances allowed quick and unlimited printing from a single negative, and photographers responded with mass documentation of landscapes, architecture and peoples to form photographic archives that could be drawn upon at any time for sales. By 1900, G.R. Lambert & Co. was advertising a collection of some 3,000 images.⁴ The firm also offered a choice of 250 postcards, selling 250,000 of them a year.⁵

In his memoirs, Thomson has described his activities as follows:

During the ten months I spent in Penang and Provinces Wellesley, I was chiefly engaged in photography—a congenial, profitable and instructive occupation, enabling me to gratify my taste for travel and to fill my portfolio, as I wandered over Penang settlement and the mainland hard by, with an attractive series of characteristic scenes and types, which were in constant demand among the resident European population.⁶

Here is a description of a British photographer collecting a series of “scenes” and “types” for his European audience, which were subsequently published in *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China and China* (1875). In *The Body and the Archive*, Allan Sekula has suggested that the archive marks the introduction of “panoptic principles into everyday life”.⁷ While Sekula was primarily looking at portraits, namely how photography was used in criminology and science, the idea seems particularly apt for the colonial archive. The very act of cataloguing and surveying is one of power, with authority provided by photography’s indexical capability and bolstered by its use within the field of science. This applied not only to portraits, but also to landscapes and objects: this is a Malay man; these are tropical fruits; this is the port. This panoptic style of cataloguing can clearly be seen in the archives of G.R. Lambert & Co.,



FIGURE 2: *Studio portrait of Siamese wet-nurse with child*, G.R. Lambert & Co., c. 1890. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

not only in the sheer quantity of views, but in the way each image is captioned with a number and descriptor (Figure 2). In a very practical sense, photography regulated the vision of 19th-century Singapore and continues to regulate it today. Within this framework, it is not the individual photo that holds significance, but the archive as a whole that provides the legitimacy. As Sekula notes, “The central artefact of this system is not the camera, but the filing cabinet.”⁸

If we understand these early images of Singapore as an archive, we can start to see the ways in which photography’s relationship with it was well suited to the aims of imperialism. A photographic archive provides for an

encyclopedia of images available for use and re-use, and Sekula's Marxist-derived framework has shown how this movement of photographs maintains a hidden connection between knowledge and power.⁹ The archive imposes a kind of equivalence on its contents—"Scenes of Singapore"—and obscures the social or economic linkages behind them. A photograph of a street scene can be placed next to a landscape of a tin plantation or a family portrait, all offering knowledge of Singapore's history. Yet the street scene might have been a popular postcard, the tin plantation photograph commissioned for potential investors and the family portrait a sentimental keepsake. The archive provides an illusory neutrality that simultaneously promotes an empiricist model of truth. In a sense, the photograph is the new currency of the information economy.

There have been three recent publications that have drawn on this archive to present pictorial histories of Singapore. The first is Getchen Liu's *Singapore: A Pictorial History*, which presents 1,200 images, including photographs, sketches and paintings, arranged chronologically. The second is *Singapore: 500 Early Postcards* by Cheah Jin Seng, which groups the images thematically, including "Multiracial Singapore" and "Royal Events and Exhibitions". The final one is *Singapore through 19th Century Photographs* by Jason Toh, also the only book featuring solely photographs and ordered by geographical areas such as "Chinatown" and "West, North and East Singapore". All three aim to add to historical knowledge. The foreword in *Singapore through 19th Century Photographs* by then-Chairman of the Singapore National Heritage Board, Tommy Koh, could really be applied to all three books:

There is a Chinese saying that a picture is worth a thousand words, and this volume proves the point. Filled with beautiful and finely wrought images, it also provides the kind of fascinating detail which reminds us that a city is visualized and shaped by human vision, creativity and skill. [...] And I am gratified that with this volume, so many of Singapore's earliest monuments are seen as they were when they first marked the city's skyline more than a century ago.¹⁰

These are three excellent examples of the workings of the photographic archive. Images are lifted and re-ordered in different taxonomies, paired with new text to present historical narratives. The photographs are there to provide empirical proof of the text, but at the same time, to convey an aestheticised history of Singapore. Consider a photograph of H.N. Ridley, the first director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Circulated as a postcard by G.R. Lambert and Co., the caption on the front states "Extension of original cutting on an



FIGURE 3: H.N. Ridley in the Botanic Gardens, G.R. Lambert & Co., c. 1905.

old para rubber”.¹¹ The image shows a European man in a suit standing next to a large rubber tree being tapped for sap. In *500 Early Postcards*, this photo is included in the section on “Multiracial Singapore”. Ridley’s entire career and role in literally shaping the landscape of Singapore is erased in favour of a representation of a European man standing next to a “native” (Figure 3). Irony aside, I highlight this example to show how the archive continues to work in support of ideology even today.

The Nature Museum

How then can we reframe this archive? If we accept that the archive is not simply a repository of things but an ordered system from which history is written, how do we challenge its authority? In *The Nature Museum*, Zhao has

continued his practice of engaging with fictional histories and narratives through colonial photographs. While there was a performative aspect to the version at the Singapore International Festival of the Arts, where Zhao and playwright Joel Tan took turns presenting short narratives about different parts of the display, the other versions all left the viewers to their own devices. The sheer amount of visual material is overwhelming and one has to struggle to make sense of it. In one section is a study on commercial plantations: photographs of trees cover the wall. The photographs are almost identical and they start to take on a symbolic value. This is the tree, cultivated and harvested. Another section presents the coconut pearl, a precious gem discovered and farmed around Singapore. Maps and statistics are shown alongside the photographs. Yet another part of the display contains bewildering materials about the Singapore Stone, a slab of rock with an undeciphered inscription dating back to at least the 13th century. It was blown up by British militia in 1843 to widen the passageway of the Singapore River, but here are strange photographs suggesting alternative narratives. Embedded in both text and photographs, fact and fiction intersect and make it impossible to grasp any sort of clear historical narrative. The archive is brought to life with overwhelming force. Images and objects float through the space as meanings detach and shift.

The very characteristics of the archive that lend itself to appropriation are the same characteristics that prevent it from settling into a fixed place. In *The Nature Museum*, the subject is missing—the artist is effaced, the natural history society does not actually exist, the photographer is unknown, the scientist is dead. Zhao's works, in fact, are always attributed to The Institute of Critical Zoologists (ICZ), a pseudo-scientific fictional think tank. The attempt to restore the subject, or in Derrida's terms, the restitution of truth, is never quite possible. Similarly, we are unable to consider the thing itself because we do not know which parts are real and which parts are fiction. Instead, Derrida suggests that we can only fill that emptied space with our words, with language.¹² And so we can only enter and leave the thing at intervals, weaving into and out of the work with language, and interpretation. We cannot actually inscribe or extract the truth in the photographic archive, but we can speak of things outside it, and hence of it.

Ironically, Zhao's success and increasing prominence within the international art circuit has diminished this important aspect of his art practice. His early installations often confused viewers who took the ICZ at face value, which added to the disjuncture between fiction and reality. When possible, Zhao continues to do this. For example, there is no mention of the artist's name in *The Bizarre Honour*. The write-up was simply an announcement of



FIGURE 4: *The Nature Museum*, Singapore International Festival of the Arts, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

a museum by “one of Singapore’s most important natural history societies”.¹³ However, at the APT 9, there is a clear attribution of the artwork to Zhao, who is also described in the catalogue as “presenting his work through the creative framework of the Institute of Critical Zoologists”.¹⁴

Working with historical photographs also presents a specific set of challenges. The photograph has to grapple with the referent, the original context, and most importantly, with time. In his reading of Barthes, Michael Fried has suggested that it is time that is the ultimate punctum, not of form, but of intensity:

Time, in Barthes’s sense of the term, functions as a *punctum* for him precisely because the sense of something being past, being historical, cannot be perceived by the photographer or indeed by anyone else in the present.¹⁵

If we accept the punctum as a subjective experience dependent on the viewer, the implication is thus that a greater subjectivity comes into play as photographs become increasingly distanced from their original time and use. Similarly, Susan Sontag has noted “the way distance in time and cultural distance from the photograph increase our interest” and that “all photographs are interesting as well as touching if they are old enough”.¹⁶ In other words,



FIGURE 5: *The Nature Museum*, Asia Pacific Triennial 9, 2018, Queensland Art Gallery. Photograph taken by the author.

there is a strange pull that historical photos emit—Barthes called it the *punctum*, Sontag the *aura*.

In her critique of social documentary, Martha Rosler has recognised the dual existence of a documentary image: the immediate, instrumental one where the image is used as testimony, and the aesthetic one where the viewer “cedes to the organismic pleasure afforded by the aesthetic ‘right-ness’ or well-formedness of the image”.¹⁷ Like Barthes and Sontag, she notes the effect of time, in this case, suggesting that time enhances the aesthetic aspect. This aesthetic pleasure is yet another difficulty encountered in reframing the archive, particularly if one is hoping to present counter narratives. This is not to say that it is impossible, but that aesthetic pleasure *is* present in the photographic image, enhanced by time, and promoting an ahistorical position that slides *away* from historical understanding.

The Nature Museum is a complicated exercise in reframing the archive. While narratives are indeed challenged and dislodged in order to open up a new in-between space, there is also an ever-present temptation by the viewer to simply reframe it *again*, by pulling out certain interesting old images and only engaging specifically with them. This is a particularly inviting and

undemanding way to make sense of *The Nature Museum* given its sheer information overload through the hundreds of photographs. Perhaps it is best to think of the artwork, and the archive in general, as a series of potentials, incomplete and contingent. The archive does not speak; we have to speak for the archive. And in so speaking, we are able to call it into the present.

BIOGRAPHY

Charmaine Toh is a curator at National Gallery Singapore where she worked on exhibitions such as *Siapa Nama Kamu: Art in Singapore since the 19th century*, *Earthwork 1979* and *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia, 1960s–90s*. She was one of the co-curators of the 2013 Singapore Biennale. Charmaine is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, researching pictorial photography in Singapore from the 1950s to 1970s.

NOTES

- ¹ Zhao has typically engaged with fictional histories and narratives by creating his own digitally manipulated photographic work. Examples include *A Guide to the Flora and Fauna of the World* and *The Whiteness of a Whale*. See <https://www.criticalzoologists.org/main.html> for further information.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ For examples of such photographs, see Toh 2009, Falconer 1987 and Cheah 2006.
- ⁴ John Falconer, *A Vision of the Past: A History of Early Photography in Singapore and Malaya: The Photographs of GR Lambert & Co., 1880–1910* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1987), p. 5.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 36.
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 20.
- ⁷ Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive”, *October* 39 (1986): 10.
- ⁸ Ibid.: 16.
- ⁹ Allan Sekula, “Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital”, in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 443–52.
- ¹⁰ Jason Toh, *Singapore through 19th Century Photographs* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2009), p. 5.
- ¹¹ G.R. Lambert & Co., *Untitled* (H.N Ridley in the Botanic Gardens), c. 1905, in Jin Seng Cheah, *Singapore: 500 Early Postcards* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), p. 259.
- ¹² For Derrida, language is the only stable place to start the discussion. See Jacques Derrida, “Restitutions of Truth to Size, ‘De La Vérité En Pointure’”, trans. John P. Leavey, *Research in Phenomenology* 8 (1978): 1–44.
- ¹³ See <http://www.thebizarrehonour.com/#about>.
- ¹⁴ *APT9: 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (Queensland Art Gallery, 2018), p. 125.
- ¹⁵ Michael Fried, “Barthes’s Punctum”, *Critical Inquiry* 31, 3 (2005): 560.
- ¹⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1st edition (New York: Picador, 1977), pp. 135, 141.
- ¹⁷ Martha Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)”, in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 267–8.

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